

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SAB-01 AID-05 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04

H-02 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02

SS-15 USIA-06 OES-06 DLOS-06 SAL-01 IO-13 EB-07

COME-00 IGA-02 OMB-01 TRSE-00 /099 W
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R 291333Z JUL 76

FM AMEMBASSY PANAMA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8596

INFO PANCANAL

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 PANAMA 5271

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PN

SUBJECT: "CRITICA" VS. THE UNITED STATES

REF: A. PANAMA 4939, B. PANAMA 4981, C. PANAMA 4982, D. PANAMA
4983, E. PANAMA 5022

SUMMARY: EXCEPT FOR PENDING LEGAL ACTION IN THE MATTER OF
"FORTUNA III", THE BRIEF FLURRY OF ANTI-US STORIES FOSTERED
BY "CRITICA" APPEARS TO HAVE CEASED FOR THE MOMENT, LEAVING
BEHIND IT A CONSIDERABLE RESIDUE OF LOCAL COMMENT ADVERSE TO
THE PAPER, AND SEVERAL PUZZLING QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW AND WHY
IT WAS BEGUN. OUR ASSESSMENT IS THAT THIS MINOR HARRASS-
MENT CAMPAIGN WAS INSTIGATED BY A FEW INDIVIDUALS IN GOP,
PARTIALLY DIRECTED TOWARD APPEASING A RESTIVE STUDENT
MOVEMENT, BUT MOSTLY FROM A SORT OF "MENTAL THUMB-
TWIDDLING" BY THOSE INDIVIDUALS IN THE FACE OF WHAT THEY SEE
AS AN UNAVOIDABLE PAUSE IN THE TREATY NEGOTIATIONS. END
SUMMARY.

1. THE RECENT WEEK-LONG "GET THE U.S." CAMPAIGN OF
THE SENSATIONALISTIC MORNING TABLOID "CRITICA" APPEARS
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TO HAVE CEASED FOR THE MOMENT; IN THE PAST FEW DAYS

THE PAPER HAS TURNED ITS JOURNALISTIC GUNS ON OTHER TARGETS. MAJOR ALLEGATIONS (AND ACTUAL FACTS IN EACH CASE) ARE AS DESCRIBED REFTELS AND USINFO MEDIA REACTION REPORTS FOR JULY 14-20. EXCEPT FOR CASE OF TUNA BOAT "FORTUNA III", IN WHICH LEGAL ACTION IS STILL PENDING (SEPTTEL FOLLOWS), NOTHING MORE HAS BEEN HEARD OF THE VARIOUS INCIDENTS ON WHICH "CRITICA" SO RAUCOUSLY BEAT ITS DRUMS.

2. THIS CAMPAIGN LEAVES IN ITS WAKE A NUMBER OF PUZZLING QUESTIONS ABOUT WHY IT WAS EVER BEGUN. IT IS CLEAR TO US THAT THE REPORTER WHO WROTE MOST OF THE ARTICLES, AND ALL OF THE WORST ONES, HAD HELP IN PROCURING THE STRANDS OF FACT OUT OF WHICH HE WOVE HIS DISTORTIONS FROM SOMEONE IN AN OFFICIAL POSITION, PROBABLY WITHIN THE NATIONAL GUARD (GN). EVERY INDICATION WE HAVE POINTS TO GN G-2 LTC MANUEL NORIEGA, TO WHOM THE REPORTER IS PERSONALLY CLOSE, AS THIS SOURCE. IT IS EXTREMELY UNLIKELY THAT NORIEGA WOULD OR COULD HAVE CARRIED MATTERS SO FAR WITHOUT AT LEAST TACIT CONSENT FROM TORRIJOS HIMSELF, AND WE DOUBT HE DID IT WITHOUT TORRIJOS' ACTUAL PERMISSION.

3. ON THE OTHER HAND, THIS DOES NOT IN ITSELF INDICATE THAT THE CAMPAIGN WAS A CALCULATED POLICY OF THE GOP, AND THERE IS MUCH WHICH POINTS TO THE CONTRARY. AMBASSADOR'S IMPRESSION WAS THE FOREIGN MINISTER BOYD (REF C) WAS HONESTLY UNAWARE OF ACTUAL FACTS IN EACH CASE. SEVERAL IN FOREIGN MINISTRY TREATY ADVISORY TEAM HAVE NOT ONLY EXPRESSED THEIR DISMAY AT THE CAMPAIGN BUT HAVE CALLED IT A DELIBERATE PROVOCATION DIRECTED AT US BY SOME INDIVIDUALS IN THEIR OWN GOVERNMENT. A NUMBER OF SENIOR OFFICERS IN THE GN HAVE SPOKEN SIMILARLY TO THE USMILGROUP. TORRIJOS' INFORMATION ADVISER (VELARDE), UPON RETURN FROM TWO WEEKS AT THE UNESCO SAN JOSE CONFERENCE, REMARKED RUEFULLY TO EMBOFF THAT NO SOONER DID HE LEAVE THE COUNTRY THAN "EVERYTHING GOES TO POT", AND ASKED WHAT IN THE WORLD HAD HAPPENED. OTHER GOP OFFICIALS NOT DIRECTLY CONCERNED WITH FOREIGN POLICY BUT NOT CONFIDENTIAL

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OTHEWISE NOTABLY WELL DISPOSED TOWARD THE US HAVE CONDEMNED THE PRESS CAMPAIGN; ONE MINISTER IS REPORTED TO HAVE CALLED "CRITICA" EDITOR RUBEN MURGAS A "MADMAN".

4. IN THE PAST, ANTI-US CAMPAIGNS WAGED AS A POLICY MATTER BY GOVERNMENT-INFLUENCED PRESS HAVE NORMALLY INVOLVED AT LEAST ALL THREE SPANISH-LANGUAGE DAILIES PUBLISHED BY EDITORA RENOVACION (ERSA). THIS TIME,

WITH VERY FEW EXCEPTIONS, "CRITICA" SOLOED. THE REMAINDER OF THE PRESS IGNORED WHAT WAS GOING ON, OR, IF NEWSWORTHY, CARRIED THE STORIES WITHOUT "CRITICA'S" "DOUBLE-DIGIT INFLATION". ALL PAPERS, INCLUDING SEMI-INDEPENDENT "ESTRELLA", PUBLISHED THE FOREIGN MINISTRY COMMUNIQUE OF JULY 17, BUT WOULD PUBLISH SUCH A MINISTERIAL STATEMENT IN ANY EVENT. (FYI: WE HAVE SINCE HAD AT LEAST ONE UNCONFIRMED REPORT THAT THIS PUBLICATION MAY HAVE BEEN A "SNAFU" WITHIN THE MINISTRY, RATHER THAN A CONSIDERED DECISION. END FYI). SEVERAL PAPERS PICKED UP THE LEGAL ASPECTS OF THE "FORTUNA III" STORY IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. BUT AT LEAST TWO LOCAL RADIO STATIONS, INCLUDING A WELL-KNOWN MORNING COMMENTATOR AND THE LARGEST COMMERCIAL STATION IN THE COUNTRY, EDITORIALY CONDEMNED THE CAMPAIGN, AND "CRITICA" BY NAME, WHILE IT WAS GOING ON.

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5. FINALLY, IN AN UNPRECEDENTED BREACH OF SOLIDARITY "CRITICA'S" ERSASISTER, THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE "PANAMA AMERICAN", ALSO CAST ASPERSIONS ON THE CAMPAIGN IN ITS JULY 21 ISSUE. IN A COLUMN HEADED "EDITORIAL COMMENTS", THE PAPER CHARACTERIZED (ACCURATELY) "CRITICA" REPORTER AUERBACH AS "NOT NOTED FOR HIS OBJECTIVITY", CALLED

PERSONAL ATTACKS DIRECTED AT EMBASSY PAO ROCKWEILER "FARFETCHED AND SCURRILOUS, AND OBSERVED "IT IS REGARDED AS SIGNIFICANT THAT NONE OF THE OTHER PAPERS PUBLISHED BY EDITORA RENOVACION HAVE JOINED THE CAMPAIGN." INSTEAD OF ANTI-US RHETORIC, LOCAL PRESS FOR SUNDAY, JULY 25, TREATED READERS TO AN ARTICLE SUPPORTING A NEW TREATY COMPILED FROM VARIOUS QUOTATIONS FROM AMBASSADOR BUNKER'S STATEMENTS, SOME OF THEM SEVERAL MONTHS OLD.

6. GIVEN ALMOST TOTAL DISBELIEF BY MOST PEOPLE WE HAVE SPOKEN WITH THAT "CRITICA'S" STORIES HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH REALITY, AND VERY CONSIDERABLE ADVERSE REACTION TO ITS CAMPAIGN IN PANAMA, THE NAGGING QUESTION IS WHY IT WAS BEGUN AND WHAT ITS INSTIGATORS THOUGHT IT MIGHT ACCOMPLISH. THE STUDENTS INEVITABLY COME TO MIND; THERE CONFIDENTIAL

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HAS BEEN RESTLESSNESS AMONG THEM DIRECTED AS MUCH--OR MORE--AT THE GOP THAN AT THE US. THE MEETING WITH STUDENT LEADERS AT FORT CIMARRON A FEW WEEKS AGO DID LITTLE TO CONVINCE THEM THAT TREATY NEGOTIATIONS, OR DOMESTIC POLICY, ARE MOVING MEANINGFULLY. THUS, IT IS NATURAL TO SUPPOSE THAT AT LEAST ONE PURPOSE OF THIS CAMPAIGN WAS TO DEFLECT AND DELAY FOR A BIT LONGER THE SPREAD OF THIS RESTIVENESS AMONG THE STUDENT LEFT. ALSO, OMAR GOES TO THE NON-ALIGNED SUMMIT IN LITTLE OVER TWO-WEEKS TIME. ADDITIONAL "EVIDENCE" OF COLONIALIST WICKEDNESS HERE MAY NOT BE USEFUL TO HIM THERE.

7. FURTHER, TORRIJOS IS IN MANY WAYS CAUGHT IN A BOX REGARDING THE TREATY NEGOTIATIONS. ON THE ONE HAND, AS EVIDENCED BY HIS RESTRAINT RECENTLY IN COLOMBIA (SEPTEL), HE IS AWARE OF, AND APPARENTLY ACCEPTS THE CONSTRAINTS THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IMPOSES ON HIS PUBLIC REMARKS AND ON THE NEGOTATIONS THEMSELVES. ON THE OTHER HAND, HE IS AWARE OF A FEELING OF DRIFT, WITH NO ONE OFFERING HIM ANY CONCRETE ACTIONS HE CAN TAKE OR DECISIONS HE CAN MAKE TO EITHER AFFECT THAT FEELING OR TO DIVERT ATTENTION FROM IT TO PROGRESS ON THE TREATY. IN OUR VIEW, A GOOD PART OF "CRITICA" VERSUS THE UNITED STATES WAS A SORT OF "MENTAL THUMB-TWIDDLING" BY THE GENERAL AND SOME OF HIS ADVISERS. IT WAS, RATIONALLY, ILL ADVISED AND APPEARS TO HAVE ACCOMPLISHED NOTHING IN PARTICULAR THAT WAS GOOD FOR ANYONE. BUT IT WAS AT LEAST SOMETHING TO DO WHILE MARKING TIME BEFORE DOMESTIC OR TREATY PROGRESS CAN RECOMMENCE.

8. COMMENT: IT IS IRKSOME FOR THE US TO BE THE

TARGET OF SUCH GRATUITOUS MINOR HARASSMENT, EVEN IF
THE EFFECT OF THE CAMPAIGN WAS MINIMAL, OR COUNTER-
PRODUCTIVE, IN PANAMA. HOWEVER, WE DO NOT BELIEVE
THAT THIS CAMPAIGN SIGNED ANY SORT OF A FUNDAMENTAL
GOP POLICY SHIFT TOWARD INCREASING THE PRESSURE ON
THE US AS A NEGOTIATING TACTIC. NOR DO WE BELIEVE THAT
THE APPARENT CESSATION, WHETHER IT PROVES A SHORT
TRUCE OR LONGER ARMISTICE, SIGNALS ANY FUNDAMENTAL
SHIFT IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION. THE REAL PROBLEM
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FOR US DURING PERIODS SUCH AS THIS IS THAT THE GENERAL
AND HIS ADVISERS MAY AT SOME POINT, AS THEY JITTER
WHILE WAITING FOR OUR ELECTORAL PROCESS TO RUN ITS
COURSE, JITTER THEMSELVES INTO SOME ACTION WHOSE CON-
SEQUENCED THEY MAY NOT PROPERLY CONSIDER AND WHICH WE
MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO ACCEPT. BUT "CRITICA'S" RECENT
VENDETTA IS NOT YET, IN OUR VIEW, AT THAT LEVEL, AND
SHOULD BE READ FOR NO MORE THAN THE YAPPING IT WAS.
END COMMENT.

JORDEN

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